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ABSTRACT

The review examines the literature on services and needs of learning disabled students at the postsecondary level. Statistics are given showing that many learning disabled students do seek postsecondary education. Problems of definition and identification at the postsecondary level are noted. Observable characteristics of learning disabled postsecondary students are discussed and include academic problems, processing difficulties, and social-emotional deficits. The importance of increased planning for learning disabled students by postsecondary institutions is stressed. Two- and four-year postsecondary institutions are encouraged to plan in the priority areas of vocational guidance, planning, and education; faculty inservice; and development of an effective system of communication between university faculty members and clinicians working with learning disabled students. Promising programs are identified and such characteristics of successful programs as extensive cross-disciplinary screening, team planning for instruction, program evaluation, and community-public awareness components are noted. (DB)

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Post-Secondary Education for Learning Disabled Students
A Review

by
Linda B. Murphy, PhD

Paper presented at the Neurodevelopmental Center Conference of Northwest Ohio (Toledo, OH, March, 1986)

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Post-Secondary Education for Learning Disabled Students: A Review

by Linda B. Murphy, PhD

> We do not believe that a public commitment to excellence and educational reform must be made at the expense of a strong public commitment to the equitable treatment of our diverse population. The twin goals of equity and high quality schooling have profound and practical meaning for our economy and society, and we cannot permit one to yield to the other either in principle or in practice. To do so would deny young people their chance to learn and live according to their aspirations and abilities. It also would lead to a generalized accomodation to mediocrity in our society on the one hand or the creation of an undemocratic elitism on the other.
>
> Our goal must be to develop the talents of all to their fullest. Attaining that goal requires that we expect and assist all students to work to the limits of their capabilities....(National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 13)

According to Gerber (1984), students identified as "learning disabled" comprise the largest single categorical group (39%) of school-aged chidren currently receiving special educational services in this country. Additionally, there is evidence that although some of the stereotypic behavioral manifestations of this handicapping condition may be altered with appropriate intervention, the learning disabilities themselves do not dissipate naturally at adulthood (Vaugh, 1985; Schoolfield, 1978). This, coupled with the most recent findings of the United States Department of Education (1984) that indicate there has been a 70% increase in the number of identified learning disabled students in the eighteen to twenty-one year age range since

1979, leads to the startling conclusion that adult learning disabilities must become a major and immediate concern for anyone who teaches or works with young adults.

Although data regarding the postsecondary endeavors of the learning disabled population are not abundant, Mithaug, Horiuchi & Fanning (1984) conducted a survey wherein slightly over half of the respondents indicated that they had, at one time or another, enrolled in postsecondary educational programs. Of the respondents who had undertaken post high school training, 18% had attended community or junior colleges; 13% had enrolled in state colleges or universities, and 14% had sought out alternative programs. Only 8% had elected to attend technical or vocational schools. These data would suggest that while many learning disabled students abandon formal schooling immediately after high school, a significant number do attempt to continue their educations, either in two- or four-year college programs.

Estimates of the number of learning disabled students enrolled in U.S. colleges seem to vary considerably. For example, at San Jose State University, it is estimated that learning disabled students comprise approximately 4% of the total student body, with fewer than 2% having been accepted on "special admits." Of the students identified as

"learning disabled", the ratio of males to females is 6:1, which is approximately the same ratio as has been documented in elementary and secondary programs across the country. Conversely, at Cabrillo College, where a recognized effort has been made to establish strong support services for the handicapped, there are 150 identified learning disabled students in a student body of less than 6,000 (Spalding, 1980). Citing 1980 statistics, Putnam (1984) suggests that in this country, learning disabled students make up 0.6% of the total four-year college population, whereas nearly 7% are enrolled in community colleges. Of the latter, approximately 25% require support services.

A problem that frequently confounds studies of learning disabilities is one of definition. Whereas some institutions may use normal intelligence and a discrepancy formula to identify learning disabled students (Spalding, 1980), others may accept students with measured IQs as low as 75 into their learning disabilities programs (Roffman, 1982). These kinds of variations in definition have led Gerber (1984) to state that the learning disabilities category is the most ambiguous and the most suspect of all the classifications of exceptionality. Although the Federal Register definition tends to be somewhat child-oriented for direct application to adult learning

disabilities (Bowren & Bowren, 1982), it may be the best available at the present time.

> Specific learning disability means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, spell, or do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include children who have learning problems which are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, or mental retardation, or emotional disturbance, or of en vironmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage (The Federal Register, cited in Bowren & Bowren, 1982).

It is expected that as more research is conducted, a more suitable definition of adult learning disabilities will emerge; i.e., a definition that describes the handicap in behavioral as well as in causative terms. This movement from a medical to an multidisciplinary model will offer a distinct advantage to remediation specialists who are called upon to pinpoint areas requiring additional training rather than to treat the condition medically.

Some studies already have produced tentative data describing the observable characteristics of learning disabled postsecondary students. Putnam (1984) and Haig & Patterson (1980) arranged these characteristics in three basic categories: (1) academic problems (reading, spelling, mathematics, writing) (2) processing difficulties (study skills, goal setting), and (3) social-emotional deficits

(impulsivity, spacial awareness, ability to predict outcomes). It is well-established that academic and processing abilities vary greatly from one learning disabled student to another; however, there appears to be more consistency in behavioral observations within the social-emotional area than in the other two (Putnam, 1984; Haig & Patterson, 1980). Although the maladaptive behaviors most frequently described in adults parallel those identified in younger learning disabled students, they seem to manifest somewhat differently in older individuals. Deviant adult behaviors include problems with social relations, faulty decision making, apparent lack of consideration for others, poor financial management, lack of awareness of time (including chronic tardiness), procrastination, difficulty completing tasks, poor note-taking and outlining skills, struggles with reference materials, short attention span, language problems, faulty short and/or long term memory, disorganized thoughts, confusion of right and left, problems with travel, incoordination, poor spacial relations, clumsiness, academic inadequacies, catastrophic responses to strong sensory stimuli, disinhibition, alienation from family, inflexibility, and low self-esteem (Lusk, 1983; Brown, 1982; Bowren & Bowren, 1982; Hartman, 1983; Spalding, 1983;

Johnson, 1981; Burgess, Burgess & McCall, 1984; Pattschull, 1989; Further Education Curriculum Review, 1982).

Several studies have demonstrated that a basic difficulty college advisors and faculty members have in identifying learning disabled students is that they often are reluctant to reveal their "hidden handicaps". Clements suggests that some harbor a fear that they may be mentally retarded (Arena, 1980). Others are able to mask their difficulties by relying heavily upon their families and/or friends to provide assistance and direction, and thus are disinclined to seek outside help for their problems. A number are unaware of the educational and/or community services available to learning disabled students (Bowren & Bowren, 1982).

Based on the data compiled to date, it is apparent that postsecondary institutions, especially two- and four-year colleges, must give a high priority to the identification and education of high school graduates with learning disabilities (Stedman, 1983; Bowren & Bowren, 1982; Putnam, 1984). Despite the U.S. Department of Education report (1984) wherein it is stated that there has been an expansion of services to secondary and postsecondary-age handicapped students, the nation's institutions of higher education still are "inadequately involved in the education and training which is required to develop and carry out at state

and local levels a comprehensive and effective national service delivery system for handicapped individuals" (Stedman, 1983, p. 121).

A major priority area in postsecondary planning for learning disabled students is vocational guidance, planning and education (Hopkins, 1982; Roffman, 1982; Greenan, 1982; Johnson, 1981). Vocational education should consist not only of occupational training, but also should entail preparation for avocational, family and civic pursuits (Kokaska, 1983; Cook, 1983).

Another important consideration in a postsecondary program for the learning disabled is faculty inservice. It is well established that most "regular" elementary and secondary teachers are reluctant to work closely with learning disabled students until they have received special training and/or somehow have acquired basic knowledge about the handicap (Lewis & Doorlag, 1983; Hudson, Reisberg & Wolf, 1983; Putnam, 1984). Assuming that a parallel situation exists among college instructors, faculty inservice training should be included as an integral component of any comprehensive program for postsecondary students with learning disabilities (Salend & Johns, 1985; Crossland, Hasselbring & O'Brien, 1982).

A third area that should be given high priority is the establishment of an effective system of communication

between university faculty members and clinicians who work with learning disabled students. This may begin by developing formal referral systems for special-needs students (Salend, 1984). Communication then may be expanded to include team decision-making and the development of individualized educational plans (Pfeiffer, 1982). Eventually, the consultant/resource room model may be incorporated into the overall program (Hardman, Drew & Egan, 1984).

The development of behavioral checklists also should be an important outcome of a postsecondary research and development project in learning disabilities. According to Gunn & Eason (1981), these are highly effective in facilitating referral systems as well as in diagnosing specific learning problems. Checklists also have been effective when used by students for self-evaluation (Tindall, 1982).

Several promising postsecondary programs for learning disabled students already have been developed (Gunn & Eason, 1981; Moyles & Newel, 1982; Burgess, Burgess & McCall, 1984; Cant, Kelly & Nelson, 1980; Pattschull, 1980; Catalog of Adult Educational Projects, 1982; Catalog of Adult Educational Projects, 1983). Special projects have involved as little as holding a few inservice meetings a year to developing and offering comprehensive specialized

curricula for moderately handicapped adults. Most of the programs that have offered comprehensive educational and/or rehabilitative services for postsecondary learning disabled students have included the following: (1) extensive cross-disciplinary screening and/or diagnostic procedures (2) team planning for instruction (3) multidisciiplinary educational/rehabilitative delivery systems (4) consultant services and/or inservice programs for faculty members (5) program evaluation, and (6) community-public awareness programs (Pfeiffer, 1982; Burgess, Burgess & McCall, 1984; Messerer, Hunt, Meyers & Lerner, 1984; Pattschull, 1980).

As was stated in the (1985) Position Paper of the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities entitled "Adults with Learning Disabilities: A Call to Action", identification, research, and curriculum development activities on behalf of adults with learning disabilities are in their infancy. There is much to be done before the skills and talents of this special population may be fully utilized for the benefit of all - and at least a part of the responsibility must be assumed by the postsecondary institutions of this nation.

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